



Commentary

Protecting children outside of family care in low and middle income countries: What does the evidence say? ☆

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Introduction

Some of the most vulnerable children in the world are those living outside of family care – children without families to look after them; left in dysfunctional institutions or alone on the streets; victims of sex trafficking or pornography; trafficked for forced labor, or recruited for armed conflict. Efforts to assist these highly vulnerable children have traditionally focused on single categories such as children in emergencies, or children affected by HIV/AIDS. While some efforts address multiple aspects of children's adversity, currently there is little cohesion among the multiple actors – from donors to implementers to policymakers – for protecting children living outside of family care. Although current international, national, and local efforts have produced substantial benefits in some settings, much assistance is siloed and category-specific. Evidence shows that the most disadvantaged and marginalized children remain consistently at risk and underserved by disjointed policies and services intended help them.

In an effort to address this issue, more than 150 of the world's leading advocates for children from NGOs, international organizations, academic institutions, and private partners, a multitude of U.S. Government agencies and departments, and practitioners were brought together in December 2011 in Washington DC, to participate in the United States Government *Evidence Summit on Protecting Children Outside of Family Care*. This was an interagency initiative under **Public Law 109-95**: the Assistance for Orphans and Other Vulnerable Children in Developing Countries Act of 2005, which has a mandate to facilitate a whole-of-Government approach to highly vulnerable children and to ensure that United States foreign assistance is informed by evidence-based good practices. The purpose of the Summit was to examine the strength of the research evidence on existing programs and interventions, and most importantly to identify critical knowledge gaps and areas where more research is needed so that systems and programs designed to improve the overall health and well-being of these vulnerable children may be strengthened. The Summit was planned and conducted by an interagency group consisting of 35 technical experts and program managers representing 18 offices within five USG agencies and departments, including USAID,

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the Department of State, Department of Labor, Peace Corps, Department of Health and Human Services, National Institutes of Health, Centers for Disease Control, and others. The interagency partners working within the PL 109-95 coordination framework engaged in a three month long process to decide on a topic that had broad relevance for all of the agencies involved. Thus the focus on Children Outside of Family Care was deliberative and strategic. The agenda, presentations, and videos from the Summit are available at Public Law 109-95 website: <http://www.hvcassistance.org/summit.cfm>.

The Evidence Summit followed a Pre-Summit held in October 2011 that engaged 60 academics, technical experts and United States government professionals in the start of a process to consider the strength of evidence relevant to children outside of family care. This followed an intense literature review and retrieval process. The Pre-Summit participants were divided into four teams to review both peer-reviewed and gray literature through the lens of four focal questions:

Focal Question 1: What systems/strategies are most effective in identifying and enumerating children outside of family care?

Focal Question 2: What are the most effective systems/strategies/interventions to assess and address the immediate needs of children outside of family care?

Focal Question 3: What systems/strategies/interventions are effective for sustainable long-term care and protection of children with a history of living outside of family care?

Focal Question 4: What models, systems and strategies demonstrate efficacy, effectiveness, and/or sustainability for monitoring children who are or were outside of family care and/or for evaluating the impact of the programs and systems intended to serve them?

Each of these focal questions teams was tasked with writing evidence synthesis papers (see Higgs, Zlidar, & Balster, 2012, for a description of the review methods). Drafts were prepared and circulated prior to the December Summit. During the Summit, the four focal question teams presented preliminary findings and recommendations, which were discussed further by the 150 Summit participants in interactive small group discussions and in plenary to solicit references for additional literature, and insights on policy, practice, and research implications. Based on documented feedback, the four teams revisited the papers after the Summit and completed final papers which are featured in the special section of this issue of the Journal.

These articles represent a pioneering effort to describe the current evidence based for policies, programs, and research related to assisting highly vulnerable children outside of family care in low and middle income countries. They comprise a methods paper, the four inter-connected focal question papers mentioned above, and a concluding commentary. Together they reflect the collective work of 60 leading academics and technical experts inside and outside the United States Government and from many nations, along with input by the 150 Summit participants.

The papers view vulnerability holistically across multiple development and global health topic areas, and will help ensure that future efforts on children's behalf are grounded by the best research and experience available.

Overview of the review papers

As mentioned above, leading up to the Evidence Summit literature related to children outside of family care was identified and divided by relevance across the four focal questions, and then reviewed and synthesized by cross-disciplinary teams consisting of researchers and practitioners with experience in studying and working with vulnerable children in lower and middle income countries. Each evidence review team assembled and organized the available literature, identified new literature, and brought their individual expertise to bear on interpretation of the available material. Additional input was gathered during the Evidence Summit and the papers we subsequently revised and peer-reviewed.

The first article *Evidence Acquisition and Evaluation for U.S. Government Evidence Summit on Protecting Children Outside Family Care* provides a detailed discussion of the multistep literature review process that identified the published and gray literature used by the focal question teams to draft their papers, and the genesis of the Evidence Summit. The methods employed to collect information were tightly structured, systematic, and rigorous (Higgs et al., 2012).

Review paper 1: Identifying and enumerating children outside of family care

Following the methods paper is the product of the first focal question team on identifying and enumerating children outside of family care (Pullum et al., 2012). The authors review the most relevant sampling methods for identifying these hard-to-reach groups and assessing their living conditions. They also highlight the methodological and practical challenges of doing so. These populations often reside in isolated and hard to reach locations, or live in conditions of illegality and secrecy that may hinder the process of data collection. In addition, official records and administrative sources commonly underestimate the true magnitude of the affected populations and reporting mechanisms, if available may not be reliable or may be compromised by high levels of inefficiency, corruption or stigma. Even the existence of records can lead to criminalization and increased vulnerability for the affected children. The authors are careful to discuss the ethical challenges of collecting data on this population and discuss where there are opportunities for developmentally appropriate assessment.

Review paper 2: What are the most effective early response strategies and interventions to assess and address the immediate needs of children outside of family care?

This paper focuses on early response strategies and interventions for improving the outcomes of children outside of family care, including children of and on the street, institutionalized children, trafficked, children affected by conflict and disaster, and those who are exploited for their labor (Boothby, Wessells, et al., 2012). The authors point out that while early response and intervention is critical to reducing the risk of harm for children who have been separated from their families, an understanding of effective early response is crucial. Although few proven interventions emerged from the review, some promising early interventions approaches were identified. For example, in emergency settings, family tracing and reunification appears to be an effective response in regard to separated children. On the other hand, evidence suggests that placing children directly in institutional care as a first line of action, without supporting options for identifying appropriate and protective family care, is problematic. Other promising interventions include livelihood supports, psychosocial support, including the use of traditional cleansing rituals as appropriate, educational supports such as Child Friendly Spaces, the maintenance of family connectedness for children of or on the streets, the use of community-based approaches that aid social integration, and approaches that enable meaningful child participation. Key to effective interventions are coordinated, comprehensive short-term and long-term assessments to effectively identify and address the holistic and developmental needs of children outside of family care, including family tracing and reunification, shelter, food and nutrition, health, psychosocial support, education and access to livelihood. Also, there is a need to contextualize the response culturally and integrate the approaches with longer-term interventions. The authors identify many of the gaps in existing research regarding short term intervention and assessment and make specific recommendations.

Review paper 3: Systems, strategies, and interventions for sustainable long-term care and protection of children with a history of living outside of family care

Building on the review of initial early intervention, this article examines the available evidence regarding the efficacy, effectiveness, ethics, and sustainability of approaches to strengthen systems to care for and protect children living outside family care in low- and middle-income countries (Fluke et al., 2012). The authors operationalized sustainable long-term care and protection of children with a history of living outside of family care as post crisis resources intentionally and systemically designed in advance to promote and establish stable and ideally permanent family-like settings for such children. Most of the existing studies identify population characteristics, needs, and consequences of a lack of systemic services to promote family-like care rather than demonstrating effectiveness of actual interventions. For example, the authors evaluated weak evidence that was, however, based on many studies documenting the neurological, physical, cognitive (including language), and socio-emotional development of infants and young children residing in institutions that was poorer compared to children who transitioned out of institutions to family care. There is some evidence of the effectiveness of laws and policies, as well as limited evidence of service effectiveness in improving outcomes for children outside of family care. For example, research suggests that strong referral systems ensure and facilitate receipt of services by children, thus supporting long-term care. By and large, the evidence on which to base the development and implementation of system approaches based on this review were identified as quite weak, but the authors were optimistic that much of it points the way to future research and evaluation.

Review paper 4: Tracking, monitoring and evaluating systems and services for children outside of family care

The fourth paper in this issue provides a compelling discussion of the ways in which to strengthen the evidence-base for policy and practice for support of children outside of family care (Ager et al., 2012). The authors suggest that effective, efficient and sustainable mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation are required. The review of existing research and the subsequent analyses of the various models and strategies revealed available tools for assessment of children's needs, however these require refining to accommodate the specific contextual demands. The authors also call attention to the importance of evaluation of children's resiliency and protective factors in addition to assessing risk. The authors conclude by arguing that a stronger evidence-base to improve protection for vulnerable children requires evaluations that are integrated into program development, use context-appropriate methodologies able to assess intervention scalability and that employ more longitudinal designs to explore children's trajectories. Future programming will benefit from systems-wide data coordination and international comparisons, research that emphasizes coping and resilience mechanisms and encourages children's participation in monitoring and evaluation.

Finally, the Special Section ends with a Commentary on *Coordinated and Evidence-Based Policy and Practice for Protecting Children Outside of Family Care* that further summarizes the review papers and their implications (Boothby, Balster, et al., 2012). They synthesize the information presented by the review articles and make a case for a more coordinated, evidence-based strategy to address the needs of children who are abandoned, abused, or severely neglected in low and middle income countries. They also acknowledge that there are few rigorous evaluation studies available because of methodological and ethical challenges, and contrast this with the ramifications of inaction.

Summary and next steps

The evidence reviews presented here form a strong foundation to inform effective design and implementation of future assistance for vulnerable children. That was a core intent of the Evidence Summit on Children Outside of Family Care. Coinciding with the Summit, ten senior leaders across the U.S. Government cosigned a Comment published in *The Lancet* that they are “committed to establishing guiding principles for US Government assistance to affected children outside the USA and to develop a strategy. . .to promote evidence-based responses to protect these vulnerable children” (Clay et al., 2012).

That strategy is well on its way to becoming reality and the knowledge brought together in this issue is helping to form the backbone of the *United States Government Action Plan on Children in Adversity: A Framework for U.S. Government International Assistance: 2012–2017*, which is being created to promote coordinated, comprehensive, and effective assistance to prevent and respond to the needs of children facing severe deprivation, exploitation and danger over the next five years. Although not final and details are not available, the draft Action Plan offers three principle and three supporting objectives, as follows:

Principle objectives

1. Build strong beginnings: The U.S. Government will help ensure that children not only survive but thrive in life by supporting programs linking early health interventions with those that promote sound development and wellbeing of children.
2. Put family care first: U.S. Government assistance will support and enable families to care for their children, prevent unnecessary family–child separation, and promote appropriate, protective and permanent family care.
3. Protect children and women from violence, exploitation, abuse, and neglect: The U.S. Government will reinforce the efforts of national governments and partners to prevent, respond to, and protect children and women from violence, exploitation, abuse, and neglect.

Supporting objectives

4. Strengthen child welfare and protection systems: The U.S. Government will support partners to build and strengthen holistic and integrated models to promote the best interests of the child.
5. Promote evidence-based policies and programs: The U.S. Government will devote resources to building and maintaining a strong evidence base on which future activities to reach and assist the most vulnerable children can be effectively planned and implemented. This evidence base will assist in the cost-effective utilization of program funds as well as the monitoring and evaluation of program effectiveness and long-term impact on children.
6. Integrate this Plan within U.S. Government departments and agencies: The U.S. Government will institutionalize and integrate the components of this Plan as reflected in its diplomatic, development, and humanitarian efforts overseas.

The culmination of the Evidence Summit and the resulting United States Government Action Plan represent the formal recognition of a fundamental shift in how the needs of vulnerable children are viewed and addressed holistically in national policy. Given the weaknesses in the research base identified by the reviews presented here, it is encouraging to see the recognition of improvement in the research base identified as a crucial component of the Action Plan. Objective 2 also has a specific focus on assisting children outside of family care. We are optimistic that the efforts being taken by the United States Government, together with other government, international, private, faith-based, and academic partners, will lead to stronger and scalable interventions designed to show results and improved conditions and outcomes for vulnerable children.

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